Envisioning the Past

Archaeology and the Image

Edited by
Sam Smiles and Stephanie Moser

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Envisioning the Past

New Interventions in Art History

Series editor: Dana Arnold, *University of Southampton*

New Interventions in Art History is a series of textbook mini-companions – published in connection with the Association of Art Historians – that aims to provide innovative approaches to, and new perspectives on, the study of art history. Each volume focuses on a specific area of the discipline of art history – here used in the broadest sense to include painting, sculpture, architecture, graphic arts, and film – and aims to identify the key factors that have shaped the artistic phenomenon under scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the social and political context and the historiography of the artistic cultures or movements under review. In this way, the essays that comprise each volume cohere around the central theme while providing insights into the broader problematics of a given historical moment.

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Series Editor's Preface

New Interventions in Art History was established to provide a forum for innovative approaches to and perspectives on the study of Art History in all its complexities. *Envisioning the Past* is an original volume that pulls together a wide-ranging selection of material which coheres around a strong central theme. The essays consider how visual representations have shaped archaeology and the conceptualization of the past by museums, through the new medium of virtual reality and in the work of art historians. The contributors demonstrate a wide variety of interests and approaches. Particularly notable is the inclusion of several chapters dealing with topics and methods usually isolated within specific disciplines or grouped together into studies of marginalized material. Thus, the reader is able to compare chapters on American Indians with those on Iron Age Europe. The disciplinary and methodological coverage is equally broad, ranging from art-historical and archaeological to anthropological, citing such tools as virtual technology in addition to photographs and archaeological field notes.

The strength of the book is the cross-disciplinary examination of a vibrant issue at a crucial moment in its evolution. In effect, it provides a window into current cross-disciplinary thinking about the construction of knowledge concerning the past. In range, content, and timeliness, this work makes a valuable contribution to this burgeoning field of enquiry that embraces at once archaeology, architectural and art history, cultural geography, anthropology, and history.

The chapters combine to form an innovative and insightful interrogation of how we think about and envision the past, which is a prompt for future research that will take this debate in new directions. As such, the

transdisciplinary concerns of *Envisioning the Past* are most pertinent to *New Interventions*, and this volume is a very pleasing addition to the series.

Dana Arnold
London, 2004

Illustrations

Notes on Contributors

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Jonathan Bateman studied archaeology at the University of Sheffield. He has presented work on the ethnography and visual languages and discourse of archaeology at a number of international conferences and has published work on the relationship of archaeology and computer visualizations (e.g., "Immediate Realities: An Anthropology of Computer Visualisation in Archaeology," *Internet Archaeology*, 8, 2000, *http://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue8/bateman_index.html*. His "Pictures, Ideas and Things: the Production and Currency of Archaeological Images," is forthcoming in M. Edgeworth and D. Gomes, *Ethnography of Archaeology: Papers Presented at World Archaeological Congress 5*. He is Information Officer for the Council for British Archaeology.

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Paul Privateer is Associate Professor of Culture and Media Studies at Arizona State University. His area of interest is in science, technology, and society studies, with an emphasis on digital culture studies, techno-culture, and postmodernism. He has published in the area of romantic discourse and nineteenth-century theories of identity, e-learning systems, technology, and education, and is presently working with Blackwell on a social history of theories of intelligence, as well as preparing a science, technology, and society anthology co-edited with Robert Markley.

Monique Scott is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University, and an NSF Yale Peabody Museum Fellow, teaching biodiversity and human health in public schools. Her dissertation explores perceptions of human evolution and Africa in British, Kenyan, and American museums. She has worked in a great variety of museum exhibition and evolutionary education projects internationally and is currently assisting in the design of a human origins exhibition at the Yale Peabody Museum. Her larger interests aim to encourage exhibitions of anthropology to better reflect and integrate their diverse audiences.

Sam Smiles is Professor of Art History at the University of Plymouth. He has published widely on British art, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He has a particular interest in art, archaeology, and antiquarianism in Britain and has explored this in numerous essays and articles. His books include *The Image of Antiquity: Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination* (1994), *Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain, 1770–1830* (2000), and *J. M. W. Turner* (2000).

Introduction: The Image in Question

Stephanie Moser and Sam Smiles

Introduction

It is a commonplace of art history and its cognate fields that representation is never innocent. Image studies in a number of disciplines actively pursue researches into the discursive contexts that motivate representational strategies and have sought to define the numerous conventions that are employed to shape meaning and construct knowledge. We now routinely accept that no pictorial device can be a transparent illustration of the world, but instead deploys technical devices, formal conventions, and ideological assumptions to orchestrate meaning.

The value of images in archaeology is customarily understood as related to their provision of information, but once the mediation of images is taken into account that evaluation is far from simple. As a preliminary consideration, we need only remember that what counts as precision in one representational tradition may seem woefully imprecise in another. Formal and stylistic observances act as filters of meaning, delimiting what can be achieved pictorially: technical constraints can determine the amount and quality of detail to be recorded; stylistic mannerisms will inflect the recording of data. In addition, the overall impact of the image, qualities of mood and atmosphere produced through these conventions, can manipulate the viewer's reaction. Above all, the underlying rationale for the image, its commissioning, function, and intended audience will all determine the limits of what it once meant and what it may mean now. These conventions need to be understood if the imaging of archaeological knowledge is to be properly considered, and they apply with equal force

to all categories of its visual representation. We need to engage with the problematics surrounding the image's mediating function as a bearer of archaeological knowledge, and this is as valid for the analysis of virtual-reality (VR) reconstructions as it is for eighteenth-century engravings. Proper scrutiny of these representations will lead us on to treat wider concerns, especially the ideological position of the image and its contribution to any given epistemic structure.[1]

The spectrum of archaeological imagery is a broad one, ranging from excavation records, to historical reconstructions produced for research purposes, and then beyond these to more popular and/or imaginative work informed by such research. In recent times the ways in which visual images have been created to present the past have greatly expanded from two-dimensional illustrations in traditional media to VR reconstructions and moving images. Perhaps uniquely, therefore, archaeological imagery incorporates all elements of visual culture, from high art to low, from traditional to digitized media, and from "scientific" to "creative" renderings. Within this spread of activities many archaeologists working today would want to distinguish the valuable from the frivolous, perhaps using as a criterion the extent to which an image records rather than imagines its subject. On such grounds we might presume that the record, as a more research-orientated image, would be less open to critical visual analysis and might, indeed, function as a corrective to other representations of the past circulating in fine art and popular contexts. The record, in some Popperian sense, would be an image founded on secure data and from which no false inferences could be derived.

What vitiates this aspiration is the naive assumption that an image can be created and apprehended "transparently," as though some forms of graphic communication can offer pure, unmediated apprehension of their subjects. A moment's reflection shows that even excavation reports are coded, bearing traces of wider beliefs about evidence, knowledge, and the communication of both. Writing in 1965, and looking back over three centuries of archaeological draftsmanship, Stuart Piggott declared:

> All technical and scientific illustration is at once symbol and communication, a pictorial language addressing the author's audience side by side with his [*sic*] written text. It transmits information according to an agreed code of conventions which translates actuality into forms and outlines in one or more colours, usually black on white, in a manner which will convey to the observer the features of the original which the illustrator wishes to present.[2]

This formulation, as Piggott indicated, owed a great deal to the art historian Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, first published in 1956, but it chimes with Piggott's own researches into the history of antiquarianism and the development of graphic communication in archaeology.[3] In Gombrich's classic formulation, to represent is not to make an accurate copy of a visual experience, but is instead to construct a faithful relational model. By emphasizing the artificiality and culturally bound nature of representation, Gombrich had challenged the notion of the so-called "innocent eye." Piggott's interest in Gombrich's work seems to have been prompted by his own dissatisfaction with the contemporary drive toward "scientific" recording systems in archaeology, which attempted to minimize "the variables of human knowledge, experience, skill and (dirty words!) flair and genius."[4] His long study of archaeological draftsmanship had taught him that the visual record was of crucial importance to archaeology and, moreover, that its aesthetic qualities were worthy of attention. He was, moreover, perfectly well aware that every representational mode or technical procedure constituted a different language of engagement with the archaeological record, because meaning is constituted in materials and technique.[5]

In the mid-1960s, then, an archaeologist and an art historian were both concerned to examine the graphic codes through which aspects of the visible world are represented, paying scrupulous attention to the contingency of vision as a culturally bound phenomenon. A moment seemed to have arrived when art history and archaeology could have combined forces to examine the interplay between art, antiquarianism, and archaeology, considering the extensive contribution the image has made to picturing (and thus shaping knowledge about) the past. Yet art history, for all its sophistication as a means of investigating visual culture, has not made any sustained effort to consider the importance of images to archaeology. The studies that do exist are scattered across a variety of topics, especially those connected with the rise of an antiquarian sensibility from the Renaissance onward.[6] Within archaeology, equally, the recognition that Piggott afforded to the study of images has also been slow in developing, and only matured as a research concern in the 1990s.[7] Indeed, even the chapters gathered together in this volume demonstrate how wide a gulf still remains between art-historical and archaeological interpretations of this material. The characteristic reference points for each discipline do not share much common ground, as the bibliographies for the authors included here will attest. Perhaps one of the things this collection can

achieve is to reveal the potential richness of a study informed by both approaches.

Archaeology and the Image

Within the Western tradition, the origins of archaeology are traditionally associated with humanism. Although it would be a difficult quest to attempt to find the very earliest image informed by antiquarian or archaeological research, the Renaissance visual tradition includes two subjects that anticipate what have become the key categories of archaeological imagery. Thus, images of early human society during its mythical Golden Age can be aligned with archaeology's later representations of vanished cultures in historical reconstructions, while pictures showing the Discovery of the True Cross constitute some of the earliest depictions of an excavation. These two categories of image might never have been transformed into an archaeologically significant contribution, however, had not the idea of the data-rich image also developed. Humanist curiosity about the past also provoked artistic and architectural interest in the ruins of classical civilization, so evident in Rome particularly, and in isolated objects from other eras and cultures. Initially, the images made of them were not intended for wide public dissemination, but for private study or circulation among small groups of scholars and patrons. However, by the early eighteenth century, the economics of publishing had facilitated the development of illustrated books whose images were devised to offer reliable information to a reasonably wide readership. A Baconian stress on verifiable data, as opposed to mere reliance on authority, privileged the collection of accurate representation, and artists were employed to measure, draw, and organize the relics of antiquity, especially classical antiquity, so that sense could be made of them.[8] By extension, the architecture and material culture of other peoples and eras could also be subjected to the same approach, whether Gothic architecture, Egyptian antiquities, or prehistoric and proto-historic remains. James Douglas, for example, displayed the results of his excavations into Saxon graves in Kent in his *Nenia Britannica; or, a sepulchral history of Great Britain* (1793). Reproduced in aquatint, precisely because he felt this to be the best medium for graphic communication, Douglas referred to this visual data as "the facts here established," confident that his chosen means of representation would enable other antiquaries to check their finds with his discoveries.[9] The

image seemed to hold out the prospect of an objective visual databank, immunized from the provisionality of scholarly interpretation. As the English antiquarian, William Borlase, declared in 1749:

> the materials, styles, measurement and appurtenances of monuments are things not to be new moulded by, or made to comply with every fanciful conjecture, but remaining always the same, will be impartial authorities to appeal to, invariable rules to judge of and decide the customs, rites and principles as well as monuments of the ancients; and therefore it is much to be lamented that all curious travellers and writers in antiquity did not draw.[10]

For Borlase and his fellow antiquarians it was obvious that competent draftsmen could provide accurate images that would function as evidence at one remove.

To this day the importance of a full visual record of archaeological discovery is not in doubt, and what is clear from this brief résumé is that the contribution of the image to archaeological research has a long pedigree. From at least the early eighteenth century, antiquarian scholars were aware of the informative power that a graphic representation provides. Drawings, especially if they were engraved as illustrations, could disseminate knowledge, provided that sufficiently competent artists were employed. Yet competence in producing a faithful record is often in conflict with aesthetic concerns, and one feature of early antiquarianism is the quest to achieve a graphic style that was maximally informative. Often this meant eschewing many of the stylistic mannerisms artists were trained to use, thereby raising the stakes in considerations of fidelity to appearance.[11] No amount of rigor in constructing a graphic language could overcome the fact that it was still a language, whose efficacy relied entirely on others being versed in its codes and conventions. As archaeology developed, and notwithstanding the advent of photography and highly detailed excavation drawings, its problematic recourse to visual imagery remained much as Piggott formulated it: archaeological imagery is a coded system; it is both symbol and communication. It is precisely because an unmediated representation can never be achieved that it behooves us to examine the cultural circumstances, epistemic context, and semiotic register of any archaeological representation.

With particular respect to archaeology, the analysis of images should also take account of the afterlife of archaeological representations, for it is

here that the constructed past produces some of its most long-lasting effects. Images of the past survive longer than the theories they were designed originally to support; they linger on in museum displays, as illustrations in archaeologically orientated books, and as part of popular culture. And perhaps one of the reasons they do so is that archaeologists have not taken them seriously enough. Precisely because images are not generally considered by the scholarly community to be authoritative interpretations or explanations of the past, requiring detailed refinement or rebuttal, visual representations are often overlooked by archaeological researchers. Because they do not seem to offend, they are not ascribed with enough power to merit critical examination. As a result archaeologists have tended to overlook images or, at best, to consider their existence as an adventitious phenomenon, divorced from the work of "real" archaeology. In an extreme view, the image is no more than a passive reflection of archaeological discovery, sugaring the academic pill for a public in need of something less austere than the paraphernalia of archaeological research.

These ideas are, in our view, too comfortable. Like other academic disciplines, as archaeology has responded to the emergence of that skepticism associated with some aspects of post-structuralism, it has moved away from an exclusive preoccupation with empirical methods and objective analysis to a growing concern with the construction of knowledge, questioning the status and legitimacy of its traditions and values.[12] In these circumstances the imaging of archaeology can be seen as of much greater interest, encouraging self-reflexivity in the discipline insofar as a representation ultimately says more about its own cultural situation than it does about the subject it purports to depict. We believe that the imaging of archaeology should not remain a peripheral concern, for it offers a particularly rewarding point of entry into the discipline's past and present working assumptions. The power of the visual image needs to be understood, its ability to select and organize knowledge, to compress time and space, to insinuate conclusions, and to tidy away the inconvenient and the complex in the interests of a compelling vision is as true now as it has ever been.

Chapter Overview

The chapters comprising this volume are wide-ranging, but nonetheless share several overlapping concerns. Paul Privateer examines the rhetorical

force of a movie like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which provides a clear instance of the power of images, their ability to make a convincing representation. Privateer describes popular images of origins as "cultural organizing systems," whose imaginative language disguises their role in producing social epistemologies. More specifically, they create "cultural maps" that, through their repetition and institution-alization, reinforce certain social behaviors. The force of these cultural assumptions can be witnessed in other contexts. Focusing on museum displays, Monique Scott argues that ideas about Africa's role in human evolution are imbricated in wider understandings about present-day Africa. She lays bare an array of racial misconceptions – embedded in institutional and popular thinking – which continue to be fostered by popular representations on television, through other media, and in edu-cation. Despite all the "progress" that has been made in problematizing this issue, indigenous peoples are still considered to be windows on the past. As a site where verbal and visual explanations are both on display, the museum offers a compelling example of the ways in which essentially visual stereotypes can dominate meaning. This theme is taken up in Stephanie Pratt's essay. In examining the visual representations resulting from European expeditions to America, she shows how they had a power-ful secondary function in reconstructing the earliest ancestors of Europe. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century images of Native Americans facilitated a "direct apprehension" of a conceptually difficult subject: the origins of European society. Graphic representations, initially produced to illustrate voyages of discovery, were divorced from their original context to advance a thesis on the nature of human development. Where textual evidence was lacking for cultural origins and the diffusion of culture, visual repre-sentation provided a solution, acting as clear and unquestionable testimony.

James Phillips, likewise, demonstrates the cultural assumptions sur-rounding Forestier's illustration of an early British settlement. These images of a regulated and well-ordered society are shown to articulate forcefully the most positive evaluation of the archaeological data, in contrast to some of the lazier assumptions in circulation at the end of the nineteenth century about woad-covered savages. Forestier's beguiling representation of a pre-literate culture proved influential well into the twentieth century. The gendered presentation of different social spheres in representations such as these has become of particular interest to archae-ologists in recent years.

Several authors in this volume emphasize the extent to which antiquity has been recorded in terms of what was appreciated and valued about it at the time. Dana Arnold, Sam Smiles, Susan Dixon, and Darren Glazier show how visual representations privilege a highly restricted interpretation of the archaeological record. For instance, in looking at images of ancient Rome, Arnold demonstrates that key figures in the history of architecture, like Palladio, interpreted classical architecture from an explicitly gendered, rational position, which influenced his appropriation of it and blinded him to other interpretations of that legacy, as seen in Raphael's more functional approach. Arnold's chapter, with its call to "unlearn" the images, demonstrates how we first need to examine precisely how images embody ideas in order to develop different ways of seeing. We can expose their predicates/assumptions, and from here we can then begin to create different ways of seeing. As Arnold explains, our perception of an object is guided by our pre-existing thoughts about it; it satisfies the criteria of what we think it should be, rather than what it is.

Dixon and Smiles look at the visual recording of archaeological material in the early modern era. Dixon explores Giovanni Battista Piranesi's complex engravings of ancient Rome, published in the 1760s, analyzing the ways in which his techniques of presentation manipulate the relics of antiquity to produce new conjunctions of space and time. The effect of Piranesi's interventions is to sacralize these relics, making the past more distant and yet also more hallowed. Dixon suggests that Piranesi's new way of envisioning classical Rome can be usefully contextualized not only as an innovation within the history of topographical and antiquarian engraving but also as a product of Rome's and the papacy's situation at mid-century. Smiles examines the tension existing between imagination and record in apprehending British antiquity. Comparing two responses to the archaeological heritage of Wiltshire, one in the 1810s and the other in the 1930s, he argues that the protocols surrounding the function of art, its traditions and values, militated against the deployment of a privileged technique such as oil painting for archaeological purposes. This procedural difficulty may have complicated the translation of archaeological remains into a visual record, but it also hints at the positive contribution the creative act can have to engender new responses to antiquity.

Glazier takes such approaches into an entirely new direction, examining the imagery used in folk tales as a means of literally envisioning an archaeological site. Working with the same recognition of the power of images to structure comprehension, he adopts methodologies commonly

deployed for the analysis of visual culture to show how conceptual images can condense a spoken narrative into a representation as revealing as any physical illustration.

One of the key themes addressed in this volume is the way in which images that are thought to be less problematic than reconstructions using traditional media are shown to be equally ambivalent in their representations of the past. The myth that some genres of visual representation are more faithful to the archaeological record than others – photography, architectural drawing, and computer-generated imagery, for example – is questioned by Jonathan Bateman, Frederick Bohrer, Graeme Earl, and Mark Gillings. All of these techniques for imaging the past have their own stylistic conventions, which although less obviously "artistic," are clearly not objective. The idea that there is a special relationship between archaeology and photography was raised by Michael Shanks in his *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (1992). Since then few have endeavored to explore the intricacies of how this method of visualization is used in both historical and contemporary practice. Here both Bohrer and Bateman examine how photography functions in ways other than its obvious service in recording data and their retrieval from archaeological sites.

Bohrer shows how photography does far more than record, making its own interpretative position. In a discussion of a series of nineteenth-century photographs of Jerusalem he demonstrates the fusion between the documentation of sites and antiquities and the concern for aesthetic quality (e.g., a concern for composition). So, the "recording" or rendering of antiquities is a unique compilation, which takes on its own active role, transforming and reconfiguring the subjects it captures. There is a paradox in the sense that the photograph is valued for presenting archaeological information in a more comprehensible way, "improving" the interpretation of evidence. Its selective nature, and the ability to select and highlight certain features, shows how photography functions as a kind of archaeology in itself. Bohrer also reminds us that photography did not always serve as a "positivistic archive of information." Indeed, the early use of photography was not aimed to document knowledge or data, but rather to record an event in which individuals participated.

Bateman's chapter on photography focuses on archaeology and contemporary practice. He shows how central both the formal and "social" photography of archaeology are to the discipline. While the formal photography of excavations includes images of open trenches and artifacts, the

social includes images of the individuals who have worked on site. While the former serves as evidence in archaeological interpretation, the latter is typically taken as a personal record of the excavation. He challenges the way that the formal role of photography has been divorced from its social role, looking at the exclusion of people, removing them from the means of production, or the process of retrieving archaeological data; they are omitted from the published record of archaeological work as if their presence would somehow taint the seriousness of the enterprise. Here we see how "authorship" is taken out of the equation – the conventions of photography have established the importance of the "clean" archaeological image. Bateman breaks down the division between types of photographic practice and shows how excavation photographs are the end point in a set of negotiations between individuals, the data they endeavor to collect and the setting in which they work. These warrant consideration because they play a role in defining professional identity and the nature of the discipline.

The chapters on computer-generated imagery (CGI) by Graeme Earl and Mark Gillings raise the issue of their interpretative nature. Challenging the belief that the increasing technological sophistication of computer images will lead to an improvement in visions of the past, Earl and Gillings argue that such images remain untheorized because of the faith archaeologists have in new technologies of representation. Earl focuses on TV CGI and advocates a greater reflection on the nature of the relationship between TV producers and archaeologists. While there are debates regarding VR in research and museums, there is nothing on the way 3-D visuals are being used on TV, very probably because the populist nature of archaeology on television tends to render it professionally suspect. While archaeologists maintain these assumptions about the relationship between the media and the discipline, there needs to be more dialogue between producers of popular knowledge and archaeology. Earl argues that computer images are more deceptive than other graphical techniques, which stands at odds with a discipline concerned to acknowledge its interpretative dimensions. The project of ever-developing CGI reconstructions will not capture a closer vision of reality than any other form of representation. CGI visual imagery needs to go beyond being "authentic," to acknowledge the aesthetic and to expose the technological process that ends in its seemingly convincing visual representation. Gillings, similarly, adopts a skeptical position with respect to VR. He identifies the assumptions about VR in archaeology that restrict the use of this technology –

that the more "accurate" the image the better; that VR pulls everything together at the end, that VR is a tool, not an interpretative device.

Reflections on the historical and contemporary use of the image in archaeology reveal that the issues and characteristics of visual representations that we identify now were present in early modern reconstructions of the past and, equally, that new techniques of imaging cannot be assumed to be superior to traditional media as recorders of objective data. The ability of the image to produce its subjects, as opposed to being a passive mirror of reality, stands as a rebuke to any simple-minded belief in the objectivity of modern recording techniques. Yet, the conclusion we might draw from this need not be unduly pessimistic or defeatist. A better understanding of the contribution images have made, and continue to make, to archaeology should allow all those involved in this area to work more subtly with this resource. If we are to liberate the image from its impossible role as an objective record, we can only do so by creating and developing new imaging practices that work with indeterminacy and provisionality. The image capable of embracing the uncertainty of knowledge is a rich intellectual resource; rather than working with the clear delineations of an over-reductive picture, we might do better to highlight the aporias and occlusions of a more fractured vision. Images could then begin to offer the possibility of large-scale epistemic change, not only within archaeology but also outside it, in the museum displays and virtual reconstructions on offer to the general public.

Notes

1   See, e.g., W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Language of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).
2   Stuart Piggott, "Archaeological Draughtsmanship: Principles and Practice Part 1: Principles and Retrospect," *Antiquity*, 39 (1965), p. 165.
3   See also Stuart Piggott, *William Stukeley, an Eighteenth-century Antiquary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), *Antiquity Depicted: Aspects of Archaeological Illustration* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), and *Ruins in a Landscape* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976).
4   Piggott, "Archaeological Draughtsmanship," p. 166.
5   In 1941 Piggott described a book project, for the general public, combining his archaeological text with drawings by John Piper, which would "give a new reality that photographs lack." Letter to Peggy Piggott, July 1, 1941, Piggott Correspondence, Oxford Institute of Archaeology. See Sam Smiles, "An-